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The price of being a great power.

WHO, US?

YES, US. Who else? It is touching to observe the air of mystification and outraged innocence surrounding the recent attacks on Americans. What did we do to be treated in such a foul way? we ask each other. After all, the only sin of the TWA hostages now suffering abuse and possible murder by their Lebanese captors is that they were in the wrong place at the wrong time. It could have happened to any of us: to be kidnapped, or blown from the sky, or mowed down while sipping a beer in a San Salvador café. It might yet happen to some of us.

The truth is that we are targets because we are Americans and there are people in the world who have a grievance against us. It was not a Lufthansa or SAS plane that was hijacked; it was an American flag carrier. Navy frogman Robert Dean Stethem was brutally murdered by his captors because, in the words of one of the released hostages who saw him beaten, "he was an American and a soldier." For many people America is the enemy, and all of us, in uniform or not, are targets.

We are told by President Reagan that people who do such things are "uncivilized barbarians." Of course they are. But indignation doesn't get us very far. Much of what goes on in the world is barbaric, and those who commit uncivilized acts present perfectly civilized reasons for doing so.

Ours is an age that puts a low priority on civilized constraint: at least where the greater glory of God or Allah, or "socialist solidarity," or the nation-state is concerned. To argue that reason, decency, and moderation govern the human soul brands one as dim-witted or obtuse. We've gone a long way down from the 19th century, with its belief in human progress and perfectibility. The First World War, with its four years of mindless slaughter, ushered in our own age of unreason. Since then it has been the death camps of Nazi Germany, the Soviet gulags, and the terrorism of true believers.

We in the United States have been spared much of this insanity. Though there have been violent incidents in our society, and our government has been responsible, directly or indirectly, for actions of violence abroad, Americans have been shielded from the breakdown that has destroyed a once supremely civilized city like Beirut. We have been spared and we have been naive about why others hold us responsible for terrible things that have happened to them.

This is why the TWA hijacking, like the Iranian hostage episode five years ago, fills us with anger and incomprehension. We want to strike back against our tormentors.

And when we find, as we did in Tehran, that we cannot be sure whom to strike back against, our rage is compounded by humiliation.

The humiliation takes its outlet in a "nuke the bastards" response. You can't get away with doing that to us. But they usually do get away with it. Ronald Reagan vows that the hijackers, like the murderers of the Marines in El Salvador, will not go unpunished. But his administration, for all its tough talk, never has retaliated against those who twice blew up the American Embassy in Beirut and killed 241 of our Marines in their barracks.

We have a right to be angry, and a right to retaliate. To stand idly by once again and wring our hands in dismay is to invite more hijackings and murderous assaults. Attack us if you will. But don't expect to get away with it unpunished.

IT IS important to remember, however, that the violence directed against us is not necessarily irrational. Though uncivilized, it is a logical response to actions we have taken. It is designed not to humiliate us, but to punish us. Specifically, it is designed to force us to change the way we behave. Violence is committed against us not because of who we are, but because of what we do. Those who cannot fight us on the field of battle take us on where we are weakest. They make no distinction between those who carry rifles and those who carry books or babies.

By formal rules of warfare this is terribly unfair. But the weak believe they cannot live by such rules, that their god or their cause sets higher standards. And they would reject contemptuously the notion that any American is innocent. They hold us collectively responsible for actions taken against them: for supporting, in Lebanon, a faction they want to destroy; for propping up, in El Salvador, a government the guerrillas want to bring down.

This is not illogical. We live in a democratic society. We choose our government. We are responsible, all of us, for its policies, whether or not we individually approve of them—just as white South Africans, whatever their personal qualms about apartheid, are responsible for their government's actions. Our policies in the Middle East and Latin America may be wise or unwise. Even within the pages of TNR we have different views about that. But we cannot, as a nation, avoid being held accountable for them. Nor, as we are learning, as individuals.

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This is the price we pay for being a great power. We have defined our interests globally and involved ourselves in the internal affairs of many nations—far more deeply than most Americans realize. This is not to suggest that we should cease to be a great power. We long ago made the decision to intervene globally, and it is difficult to see how a country with the resources, the energies, and the missionary zeal of the United States can fail to be involved nearly everywhere.

But there is a price to be paid. We cannot go around trying to reorder the world—putting down insurrections here, encouraging them there, taking sides in civil conflicts—without making ourselves someone's enemy. Naïve minds and great empires, to turn a phrase, go ill together.

When assaulted by those who consider us their enemy we react as though we were bystanders set upon by some madmen. But to much of the world we are an omnipresent giant, intervening everywhere with money (foreign aid), weapons (military assistance), and even our own troops (Korea and Vietnam). Nicaraguans see that we send CIA teams to blow up their bridges and finance dissidents to assassinate peasants. The Shiites of Lebanon and Iran see that we (like the communists) spread the evils of imperialism, avarice, and blasphemy.

That they may misunderstand our motives is beside the point. What matters is that they have defined us as their adversary because we are deeply involved with their opponents in the power struggles they are waging. That is a game that we have chosen to play. In the past we could do so at little cost, either in our money or in other people's lives. Terrorists have upped the ante. Now we are all in the game, civilians and military alike. Terrorism has democratized the world power struggle.

We have reason to be angry at what has happened to us, but not to be puzzled. Having chosen to involve ourselves in other people's revolutions, we now have to play by their rules, not ours.

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